



ESID Briefing No. 20

From schooling to learning: Is Uganda committed to increasing the quality of basic education?

KEY FINDINGS:

- Uganda has made impressive progress in securing access to basic education for its children. However, the quality of provision remains low and pupils achieve lower learning outcomes than their counterparts elsewhere in the region. The political commitment to fee-free universal primary education can undermine local efforts to provide improved schooling, which requires additional financial resources.
- The kind of strong coalition that helped build and maintain support for the access agenda, which involves a 'fit' between the ruling party, donors and the rural poor, is not evident when it comes to quality improvement. This, and other governance problems within the education sector, means there are few top-down pressures for increasing the quality of education.
- Reforms and investment required to improve quality would potentially be politically costly in a system of decentralised rent management, because it cuts away opportunities for patronage.
- At the critical level of districts and schools, there is a glaring lack of capacity to monitor and promote learning, with the function of education inspectors particularly under-prioritised.
- Where higher levels of learning are attained, these usually result from local actors building alliances across political, bureaucratic and community divides, and devising 'institutional fixes' (e.g. innovative accountability procedures, forging co-financing arrangements with parents) that can help overcome structural constraints.

Table 1: Uganda’s education performance compared with Tanzania and Kenya

	Uganda	Tanzania	Kenya
Gross enrolment rates (%), primary, male and female, 2009 (UNESCO)	130	90	105
Pass rates (%) numeracy and English combined (ages 10-16), 2012 (UWEZO)	38	45	70
Primary completion rate (%), 2009 (UNESCO)	53	58	85
Grade 6 pupils reaching level 5 difficulty in reading (%), 2009 (UNESCO)	16	25	22
Grade 6 pupils reaching above level 4 (basic reading ability) (%), 2007 (UNESCO)	55	90	80

Sources: UWEZO, East Africa and UNESCO data at: www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/eastafrica.pdf

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government pledged to provide Universal Primary Education (UPE), and the following year it abolished school fees and promised free education to a guaranteed four children per family. After 1997, significant increases in funding for implementing the UPE programme occurred with the support of another significant player in the education system – donors.

Literacy rates rose as more children were enrolled, but not nearly as much as would have been expected, given that there were many more children attending school. The literacy rate was 56% in 1991 and 73% in 2010. However, the Uganda National Household Survey reports that literacy rates declined from 71% in 2010 to 68% in 2013. Uganda also performs poorly comparatively within the region (see Table 1).

Developments in the Ugandan education sector since 1996 paint a picture of increased enrolments, but little or no improvement in quality, despite several policy initiatives and an apparent policy consensus that initiatives to improve quality are important. Studies on education reforms in Uganda tend to take the education policy process for granted. They do not deal with how improved education becomes part of a political agenda or the politics behind how initiatives are implemented and sustained once they are introduced.

FINDINGS

Before UPE was introduced, the financial involvement of parent teacher associations (PTAs) in schools extended the power of parents and religious groups over the financing and administrative functions previously assigned to the state. As a consequence, PTAs achieved an institutionalised stability within the school system that significantly altered the power relationships within schools and between the state and society in the provision of education. Attempts to abolish PTA fees during UPE reforms highlighted tensions between government interests and the interests of parents and teachers in education; in helping to foster the exit of non-poor families from public education, this has tended to reduce local accountability pressures.

“The political dividends of the UPE initiative were clear”

The political dividends of the UPE initiative were clear: improving access to education would be credited to the NRM government, whose popularity would increase as a result. The public funding that was pumped into the primary education sector after 1996 was basically to improve access, with little attention paid to the quality of education. In a system of decentralised rent management, maintaining support from important factions of the ruling coalition meant allowing certain leakages, and this has occurred in the education sector (as in other sectors of service delivery, such as agricultural services and health).

“Maintaining support from important factions of the ruling coalition meant allowing certain leakages”

Once the president had pledged free education, he proved reluctant to reverse the decision, because this would mean abandoning a pledge to poorer parents and recognising the government’s inability to uphold its promises. Local leaders also make political capital from this promise, in ways that can undermine efforts by schools to establish cost-sharing agreements with parents.

“The ruling NRM elite, the donors and the rural poor formed a formidable policy coalition for universal access”

The implementation of UPE from 1997 onwards not only fitted into the NRM’s political agenda, it also fitted in with the poverty reduction strategies emphasised by development partners and the Millennium Development Goals in the making. This ‘fit’ between the ruling NRM elite, the donors, and the rural poor formed a formidable policy coalition for universal access which is not evident in the support for quality improvement.

For the more well-off and educated Ugandan parents, however, a higher quality education is particularly important, and hence those who can afford it send their children to private schools. It is these parents who have increasingly voted with their feet since UPE was introduced and exited the government system in search of higher quality education.

“Substantial investments are required to improve the quality of education compared with quantitative expansion”

The lack of effort to implement policy initiatives to improve the quality of education can be understood from a political settlement perspective. Substantial investments are required to improve the quality of education compared with quantitative expansion. In addition to the financial investment to recruit, train, monitor and evaluate teachers, the government would need to address other structural issues. The comprehensive reforms needed would probably require the re-introduction of some form of user fees for parents. This could threaten the government’s political support and weaken its electoral advantage, although there is growing evidence that parents would be willing to make further contributions in return for a stronger focus on higher quality provision.

In all, three factors explain the weak political drive for quality education: first, the formal and informal governance arrangements allow for a system of decentralised rent management that serves to appease lower-level factions, rather than drive up performance; second, the NRM government is to some extent trapped by its own rhetoric of free primary education for rural constituencies in particular; and third there is relatively weak pressure to push through education quality-enhancing reforms, whether from civil society, powerful interest groups or parliament.

At district level, there is a glaring lack of capacity and education inspectors’ monitoring and inspection function is especially under-prioritised. In both Mukono (a district that generally achieved higher-than-average learning outcomes) and Mayuge (a low-performing district), the inspectorate was evidently underfunded, with insufficient staff and no means of transport to inspect the large number of schools under their control.

“It is as if we currently have three governments, a national government, local government, and local governments have a district and the sub-counties. These systems are too weak and uncoordinated to hold the people accountable at the school level. The support supervision at the grassroots is too weak.” (Interviewee from the principal’s association, May 2015).

Variation in individual school performance requires a contextual political economy analysis. Headteachers and school management committees that are well connected to local politics and government emerged as more successful than others. Consultations at the national and district level, as well as within schools, also reveal the importance of political consensus around education and cost-sharing.

In the instances where political consensus is reached between key stakeholders regarding the significance of improved quality, this creates space for devising innovative solutions that can greatly improve school performance. Strategies include providing incentives for teachers, such as improved accommodation and allowances to reward teachers that perform well, as well as holding teachers accountable through regular appraisals. Securing financial contributions from parents towards feeding students and teachers is another strategy that has been credited with improving both teacher attendance and academic performance.

“Where political consensus is reached... this creates space for devising innovative solutions”



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Successful schools have managed to maintain a balance between monetary and political interests and incentives, achieving political consensus locally at the expense of uniformity of educational provision in the country and the idea of UPE as an economic equaliser and social leveller.
- Cost-sharing practices are unofficially accepted by the government, thereby encouraging school administrations to mobilise additional funds from local councils and parents in order to improve school performance. There is an argument now for more open discussions to be held around how schools are financed in Uganda.
- Significantly increased levels of support for building capacity amongst school leaders, parent and teachers associations and school management committees are required.
- A particularly strong focus is required on building the capacity of district inspectorates to overcome problems of underfunding, insufficient staff and lack of transport.
- There is a pressing need for donors to help foster the construction of a broader and stronger coalition of key stakeholders in favour of improving the quality of education in Uganda, at both national and local levels.

FURTHER READING

Kjaer, A. M. and Muwanga, N. K. (2016). Inclusion as political mobilisation: The political economy of quality education initiatives in Uganda. ESID Working Paper No. 65. Manchester, UK: The University of Manchester.

UBOS (2014). *Uganda National Household Survey 2012/13*. Uganda Bureau of Statistics. Kampala: Government Printer.

UWEZO (2012). *Are Our Children Learning? Annual Learning Assessment Report*. UWEZO Uganda; Kampala.

World Bank (2015). *World Development Indicators Online Databank*.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

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DW3185.10.16



The **Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre** (ESID) is an international partnership of research and policy institutes led from the Global Development Institute (GDI) at The University of Manchester. ESID is funded by the UK Government.

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October 2016.